

12-1-1969

Erasmus on the Study of Scriptures

Carl S. Meyer

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm>



Part of the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Meyer, Carl S. (1969) "Erasmus on the Study of Scriptures," *Concordia Theological Monthly*. Vol. 40, Article 71.

Available at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm/vol40/iss1/71>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Print Publications at Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. It has been accepted for inclusion in Concordia Theological Monthly by an authorized editor of Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. For more information, please contact seitzw@csl.edu.

Erasmus on the Study of Scriptures

CARL S. MEYER

Erasmus (1469—1536)¹ was the editor of the first published Greek New Testament printed from movable type (1516).² He translated the books of the New Testament into Latin³ and also paraphrased them (except Revelation) in that language.⁴ He published the notes of Lorenzo Valla (1406—1457) on the New Testament.⁵ He must likewise be accounted as

one of the important theologians of the first half of the 16th century⁶ as well as an earnest advocate of the study of Scriptures.⁷

I

Prerequisites for Biblical studies coincide with the characteristics one brings to the philosophy of Christ, Erasmus held. This meant a heart undefiled by the sordidness of vice and unaffected by the disquietude of greed.⁸ We must therefore examine the *philosophia Christi* concept in Erasmus as the basis for understanding his approach to Sacred Writ.

Erasmus used a variety of phrases for this concept. He called it the heavenly philosophy of Christ,⁹ the heavenly doc-

¹ The standard edition of Erasmus' writings is *Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami Opera Omnia*, ed. J. Clericus (10 vols.; Leyden, 1703—1706). The reprint issued by Gregg Press in London, 1961—1962, was used. Cited as LB.

Ausgewählte Werke, ed. Hajo Holborn (Munich: C. H. Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1933). Cited as AW.

Ausgewählte Schriften, ed. Werner Welzig (8 vols.; Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1968—). This is a Latin-German edition. Cited as AS.

The letters of Erasmus are cited from *Opus epistolarum Des. Erasmi Roterodami*, ed. P. S. Allen, H. M. Allen, and H. W. Garrod (12 vols.; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1906—1958). Cited as EE.

Translations other than my own are specifically noted.

² LB, VI, contains the text, Latin translation, and Erasmus' notes; EE, II, 164—72, ep. 373, the preface of the *Nouum Instrumentum* (1516) "To the Reader," with editorial introduction by P. S. Allen, is particularly valuable. See also H. F. Moule, "The Greek Text of Erasmus," *The Expositor*, Eighth Series, XI (1916), 421—37.

³ EE, IV, 58n.

⁴ LB, VII, for the *Paraphrases in N. Testamentum*; LB, V, for those on some psalms.

⁵ EE, I, 406—12, ep. 182, the preface to the *Vallensis Adnotationes* (1505). Valla's notes are found in Laurentius Valla, *Opera Omnia* (Basel, 1540; reprint by Bottega d'Erasmus in Turin, 1962), I, 801—95.

⁶ Ernst-Wilhelm Kohls, *Die Theologie des Erasmus* (2 vols.; Basel: Friedrich Reinhardt Verlag, 1966).

⁷ For our topic the prefaces to the various editions of the New Testament are most important. The "Paraclesis" and the "Methodus" were found in the first editions of 1516 and other editions; the "Apologia" appeared in 1516 and all subsequent editions. The "Ratio verae theologiae" appeared as a separate tract in 1518 and as a preface to the second edition of the New Testament in 1519 and in later editions. Gerhard B. Winkler, "Einleitung," AS, III, xviii—xx; Hajo Holborn, "Einleitung," AW, pp. ix—xvix. The prefaces are found in AS, III; AV, pp. 137—305; LB, V, 137—44 ("Paraclesis"); LB, V 75—138 ("Ratio"); *Desiderius Erasmus: Christian Humanism and the Reformation, Selected Writing*, ed. John C. Olin (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), pp. 92—106, for the "Paraclesis."

⁸ "Methodus," AS, III, 40, "sed plane caelestem animum afferamus ea dignum."

⁹ "Paraclesis," AS, III, 20, "caelesta Christi philosophia"; "Ratio," AS, III, 158. 200; "Paraclesis," AS, III, 10: "He alone came down from heaven as Teacher; He alone can teach with cer-

The author is graduate professor of historical theology at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis.

trine,¹⁰ the doctrine of Christ,¹¹ the religion of Christ,¹² the Christian philosophy.¹³ For him it was the philosophy of the Gospel,¹⁴ the religion of the Gospel,¹⁵ the doctrine of the Gospel,¹⁶ the evangelical wisdom,¹⁷ the evangelical philosophy,¹⁸ the

tainty, since He is the heavenly Wisdom; He alone, as the only Author of the salvation of mankind, can teach saving wisdom; He alone can prove absolutely what He teaches; He alone can carry out what He has promised." Here Erasmus uses the *solus Christus* concept five times, reminding one of the Reformers. Another translation is in *Selected Writings*, p. 95.

¹⁰ "Ratio," AS, III, 128, "caelestis doctrina"; "Paraclesis," AS, III, 22, "caelestia dogmata."

¹¹ "Ratio," AS, III, 14, "Christi doctrina"; "Ratio," AS, III, 294; "Methodus," AS, III, 58, "Christi dogmata."

¹² "Ratio," AS, III, 266, 268, "Christi religio."

¹³ "Paraclesis," AS, III, 2, 14, "philosophia christiana." See Winkler's note, p. 3, n. 4; Kohls, I, 74, 137—38, 198, 221; *ibid.*, II, 23, n. 151. The question of how much this concept owes to the *devotio moderna* and late medieval mysticism cannot be entered into here.

¹⁴ This and the next eight phrases are the modernized translations of phrases found in the 16th-century English translation of the *Paraphrases of the New Testament*. The original is reprinted in LB, VII. *The first tome or volume of the Paraphrase of Erasmus upon the newe testamente*, trans. Nicholas Udall et al. (London: Edward Whitechurche, 1548), "Preface to Matthew," no pagination. The copy in the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, D. C., was used. Cited as STC 2854a.

See also E. J. Devereaux, "The Publication of the English Paraphrases of Erasmus," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, LI, 2 (Spring 1969), 348—67. Devereaux holds, p. 348, that "the English *Paraphrases* of Erasmus ultimately had only slight influence on Anglican thought" (see also p. 367).

¹⁵ STC 2854a, "Preface to Matthew."

¹⁶ STC 2854a, fol. ii, A, i^r.

¹⁷ STC 2854a, ad Matt. 7, fol. xxxii^r.

¹⁸ STC 2854a, "Preface to Luke," fol. (: :) iiiib^v.

evangelical doctrine.¹⁹ This heavenly wisdom is Christ's heavenly philosophy, His godly and wholesome philosophy.²⁰ To Erasmus the concept of "philosophy" was a broad one, to be equated with doctrine or religion. Since it was from Christ it was divine, heavenly, and above all evangelical, for it embodied the Gospel. Christ's wisdom alone²¹ is the evangelical and heavenly philosophy.²²

The *philosophia Christi* was programmatic for Erasmus, practical and functional, the holiest and the most beneficial blueprint for Christian living.²³ In Baptism, he said, a person first professes the *philosophia christiana*;²⁴ through Baptism he enters into a covenant with his Leader.²⁵ It can be made plain and easy to every man,

¹⁹ STV 2854a, ad Luke 10:31, fol. xcvi^r.

²⁰ STC 2854a, ad Matt. 5, fol. xvii^r.

²¹ STC 2854a, ad "Preface to the Gospel of John," fol. i.A.i^r.

²² STC 2854a, *ibid.*, () . ii^v.

²³ "Paraclesis," AS, III, 2, "mortales omnes ad sanctissimum ac saluberrimum Christianae philosophiae studium adhortor." See also *ibid.*, AS, III, 14—26. Already in his *Enchiridion* (1503) Erasmus pointed up the necessity for the Christian soldier of studying the Scriptures. "The Handbook of the Militant Christian," *The Essential Erasmus*, ed. John P. Dolan (New York: The New American Library, 1964), p. 53 ("The first rule"). Another translation is found in Vol. XIV of the *Library of Christian Classics*, ed. Matthew Spinka, *Advocates of Reform* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953). The original and a German translation are in AS, I, 55—375; the original is in AW, pp. 22—136, and LB, V, 1—66. Dolan's translation will be cited as *Essential Erasmus*.

²⁴ "Paraclesis," AS, III, 14, "baptismus . . . in quo prima Christianae philosophiae professio est." See also *ibid.*, AS, III, 34, "in baptismo iuravimus in verba Christi."

²⁵ "Enchiridion," AS, I, 62. The German has "Führer" for "dux." He is also called "Head" and "King," e. g., AS, I, 272; AS, I, 116.

for one who is docile (teachable) has advanced greatly in this philosophy.²⁶ "The sun is not as communal and exposed to everyone as is the doctrine of Christ."²⁷ In the "Preface" of his rendering of the Gospel According to St. Matthew Erasmus said that the wisdom of Christ should be learned with the intent of becoming a better person, correcting and ordering one's life according to its prescription.²⁸ Elsewhere Erasmus said that this doctrine had its *loci* in the Sermon on the Mount and its theologians in those who live according to that sermon. He echoed the Sermon on the Mount when he wrote:

To me he is a genuine theologian who teaches not by tightly intertwining syllogisms, but by love, by the expression of his countenance and eyes, by his life, disdaining wealth. A Christian ought not to put his trust in the protection of this world, but ought totally to depend upon heaven. Injustice is not to be retaliated. Those who curse should be blessed, blessings being acquired for those deserving evil. He loves all good men as members of the same body and cherishes them as equals; he tolerates the wicked, if they cannot be corrected. Those who are deprived of their goods, who are driven out of their possessions, who mourn, they are blessed and are not to be lamented; furthermore the pious desire death since it is nothing but the transfer to immortality. If, being inspired by the spirit of Christ, he preaches and teaches this and similar things, and exhorts thereto, invites and en-

²⁶ "Paraclesis," AS, III, 12, "Tantum esto docilis, et multum in hac philosophia promovisti."

²⁷ "Paraclesis," AS, III, 14.

²⁸ LB, VII, [v]; STC 2854a, fol. i.

courages, he is indeed a true theologian, even if he is a ditch-digger or a weaver. If he maintains this also by his deeds, he is indeed a great doctor.²⁹

From this it is evident that the philosophy of Christ may be regarded as an unlearned philosophy but wisdom nevertheless.³⁰ It is a renewal, a rebirth (*renascentia*) of man's good created nature and it has its foundation in love, in life, in inspiration, in transformation, rather than in logic, disputations, erudition, or reason.³¹

If the philosophy of Christ were followed, Erasmus held, wars would cease, the conflicts between church and state would end, and those who profess it would be recognizable by their behavior instead of by name and ceremonies. Erasmus hoped to see a genuine (*γνήσιον*) Christendom that testified to the philosophy of Christ not merely by its cultus but by its life.³² The beginning of this wisdom is an understanding that agrees with the Scriptures.³³

Erasmus warned, however, that the student of Scriptures, yes, every follower of Christ, should not rely on himself; he must avoid Pharisaism.³⁴ "He [Paul] attributes whatever in us may be a virtue to the Spirit of Christ and to Christ; everywhere he calls it the gift and grace of God."³⁵ Erasmus spoke of the righteousness of faith in Pauline terms and of the completeness

²⁹ "Paraclesis," AS, III, 16.

³⁰ "Paraclesis," AS, III, 18. The contrast is between "illiterata philosophia" and "sapientia."

³¹ "Paraclesis," AS, III, 22. See also Kohls, I, 152—221; *ibid.*, II, 96, n. 127; 119, n. 565.

³² "Paraclesis," AS, III, 24.

³³ "Enchiridion," AS, I, 107.

³⁴ "Ratio," AS, III, 278.

³⁵ "Ratio," AS, III, 284.

of the gift of God in Christ.³⁶ In the heart of the servant of Christ, and this means one who has embraced the philosophy of Christ, trust in oneself is completely eliminated. "No one relies on God more genuinely than he who totally mistrusts his own powers."³⁷

Therefore, the wisdom of Christ must be learned from Christ Himself.³⁸

Now since faith is the only door to Christ, the first rule [for living a Christian life] ought to be that for this you know the Scriptures very thoroughly, which are indeed given by His Spirit, and believe them, not only with the mouth, not coldly, not listlessly, not indecisively, as the mass of Christians does, but with a whole heart. Deep inside be firmly and immovably determined, that in them there is contained not an iota, which does not pertain greatly to your salvation.³⁹

"Hear ye Him," was quoted by Erasmus⁴⁰ as well as by Luther.⁴¹ Christ can be heard, Erasmus said, in the Gospels and in the Pauline epistles; he spoke through Peter

³⁶ "Ratio," AS, III, 284—90. He paraphrased passages 2 Cor. 10, 2 Cor. 3, Rom. 9.10, Rom. 3 and quoted Rom. 3:22, 1 Cor. 7:25, Rom. 11:29.

³⁷ "Ratio," AS, III, 288.

³⁸ "Paraclesis," AS, III, 28, *ex ipso Christo*.

³⁹ "Enchiridion," AS, I, 152.

⁴⁰ "Paraclesis," AS, III, 32. "Paraphrasis in Evang. Matthaei," ad 23:10, Erasmus' marginal note reads: "Nec vocemini magistri: quia Magister vester unus est, Christus." LB, VII, 120F.

⁴¹ Luther used almost the same words that Erasmus used: "You do not know the truth of Matt. 23 [:10]: 'You should not call one another masters on earth, for you have one Master, the Christ.'" "Receiving Both Kinds in the Sacrament, 1522," trans. A. R. Wentz, *Luther's Works*, 36 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959), 248. I have counted at least 37 instances in *Luther's Works* where Luther quoted or applied the words "Listen to Him!"

and John.⁴² Bainton translated the paraphrase of the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15), ending with the sentence: "Now in the natural love of this father for his son behold the goodness of God, who is far more clement to sinful man, if only he repents and despises himself, than any father to his son, however tenderly he may love him." Bainton's comment? "This is the essence of Erasmus."⁴³

In his *Enchiridion* (1503) he maintained that the divinely inspired Scriptures, which have God as their author, present the *doctrina Christi* wholly pure, clear, and sound.⁴⁴ The Holy Scriptures, especially the gospels, provide a pattern of life in all things. Christ taught both faith and love. Faith, Erasmus emphasized, enables the believer to look away from self and to rely entirely on God; love exhorts him to do good to all.⁴⁵ In "The Funeral" (1526) Erasmus told of Cornelius who "read from the Bible passages exhorting man to trust God and setting forth God's love for us."⁴⁶

However, Erasmus emphasized love more than faith in setting forth the *philosophia Christi*.⁴⁷ Erasmus turned to Paul to prove his point, extolling "love that issues from a pure heart and a good con-

⁴² "Paraclesis," AS, I, 32, 34; "Ratio," AS, III, 170.

⁴³ From LB, VII, 408A, in Roland H. Bainton, *Erasmus of Christendom* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1969), p. 147.

⁴⁴ AS, I, 80, ". . . sola Christi doctrina tota nivea, tota candida, tota sincera est." LCC, XIV, 303.

⁴⁵ "Ratio," AS, III, 294, 296.

⁴⁶ *The Colloquies of Erasmus*, trans. Craig Thompson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), p. 370; see also p. 371. Cited as *Colloquies*.

⁴⁷ "Ratio," AS, III, 296—301, *re* faith; pp. 300—37, *re* love.

science and sincere faith."⁴⁸ Writing on the *locus classicus*, 2 Tim. 3:16, Erasmus showed the relationships between the Scriptures and faith and godliness:

. . . which Scriptures being rightly understood, even without our authority, are able to make thee learned, as far as belongeth to the obtaining of salvation, which the Gospel promiseth us, not through the observation [observing] of Moses' law, but through the assured [sure] faith, whereby we believe in Christ Jesus. That, which the Gospel partly teacheth to be already done, the same the Old Testament telleth and expresth beforehand shall come. And yet it teacheth none other thing than the Gospel doeth, howbeit after another sort if it have a godly and a learned reader. There is no reason why we should esteem the books of the Prophets or Moses to be of none effect after the Gospel is published, if through a spiritual understanding they be applied unto Christ and unto godliness. But all the whole Scripture, that is set forth unto us not by man's wit but by inspiration of the Holy Ghost, hath great profit, either to teach the things which are not unknown but with peril of salvation, or to reprove them which are against the verity, or to correct and call again them into the way that err of ignorance, or else to order and inform not in Jewishness or human philosophy, but in true innocence and uprightness of life, and is so much available for all things that make to the offices of godliness, that the man dedicated to God can be behind in nothing, but to be perfect and fully furnished to all the works of a Christian life.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ "Ratio," AS, III, 478, quoting 1 Tim. 1:5.

⁴⁹ This is a modernization of the translation of LB, VII, 1064D-F, in *The Seconde Tome or volume of the Paraphrase upon the newe testament: conteynnyng the Epistles of S. Paul, and*

Erasmus said that the Scriptures were given so that by faith men may come to eternal bliss. He also said that the essence of Christianity is living according to the Gospel. The Bible shows the Author "through whom every man has health and salvation, without whom no man may hope for health and salvation."⁵⁰ In his *Inquisitio de fide* Erasmus makes Barbatius his spokesman: "I believe those who gave us the books of the Old and New Testament were inspired by this Spirit, without whose help [power] no one attains salvation."⁵¹

Moreover, Erasmus maintained that the attitudes of the student of Scriptures had to be in harmony with the philosophy of Christ. Because the Scriptures are the genuine oracles of God, welling forth from the deepest recesses of the divine mind, Erasmus said they should be approached with reverence. Humility and veneration are needed to find the secret chambers of eternal wisdom. "Stoop to enter," Erasmus warned, "else you might bump your head and bounce back!"⁵² Absolute purity of mind is another prerequisite for the study of Scripture. Erasmus pointed to the example of Moses and Aaron, of whom a

other the Apostles. Whereunto is added a Paraphrase upon the Reuelacion of S. John (London: Edward Whitchurche, 1549), Fol. xxiii^r-^v. The copy in the Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington, D. C., was used. Cited as STC 2854.3.

⁵⁰ Ad Matt. 1, STC 2854a, fol. ii.A.^r; LB, VII, 1B.

⁵¹ *Colloquies*, p. 185; *Inquisitio de Fide: A Colloquy by Desiderius Erasmus Roterdamus, 1524*, trans. by Craig R. Thompson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950), p. 66, lines 242-44. I believe the phrase *sine cuius ope* should be translated "without whose power."

⁵² AS, I, 88; *Essential Erasmus*, p. 37; LCC, XIV, 305. See also "Ratio," AS, III, 126: "You must bend your neck, if you want to be admitted."

great degree of purity was demanded before they could ascend Mount Horeb. Moses had to remove his sandals to approach the burning bush. The eye of faith, Erasmus maintained, is to be guiltless and without dissimulation. The incomparable pearl of divine wisdom cannot be sought vulgarly or with divided affections. To enter into the palace of this queen (to mix metaphors), the innermost sanctuary of the divine Spirit, one must have a simple faith; there must be no impious curiosity, no seeking after glory, no evil obstinacy.⁵³ Erasmus lashed out against an unyielding contentiousness, calling it earthly, beastly, demonic. He cited James 3:17: "The true theological wisdom is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, without uncertainty or insincerity."⁵⁴

The first point of the commandments is to "think rightly and reverently of God and the Sacred Scriptures," Erasmus emphasized.⁵⁵ Erasmus took great pains (he was

evidently hurt) to correct Luther's accusation against him that he was a skeptic. Addressing Luther directly he told him that his reverence of Scripture was no less than that of those who devoutly worshiped them and in them he found his hope and consolation.⁵⁶ Repeatedly in the *De libero arbitrio* he asserted that he and Luther loved and revered the same Scriptures.⁵⁷ In this way he emphasized that attitudes are of prime importance in one's approach to Scriptures.

In the same vein Erasmus insisted that the authority of the Scriptures should not be questioned; complete trust was needed in studying them. He said that Paul "doesn't know how to lie,"⁵⁸ and 10 years later he repeated that Scripture "cannot lie."⁵⁹ He said, "Sacred Scripture is of course the basic authority in everything."⁶⁰ The heavenly philosophy of Christ is not to be corrupted by human laws or doctrine,⁶¹ but Christian people will follow "the sacrosanct and inviolable authority of

⁵³ "Ratio," AS, III, 124, 126.

⁵⁴ "Ratio," AS, III, 130. James said, "The wisdom from above is . . ." See also Winkler, "Einleitung," AS, III, xxiii-xxiv. Erasmus expressed this same thought in "Antibarbarus," LB, X, 1726A. There he said: "We hear what the Sacred Scriptures command." Contentiousness is called *terrena, animalis, diabolica*. A little later in this same tract he said, LB, X, 1726E: "Why do we twist the simple Scriptures? . . . This is said not about the liberal letters, but about little theological questions, which pertain to nothing, nevertheless lead to the most persistent contentions among themselves. By the foolish rabble the erudite seem nobler; among the erudite Christianity does not know arrogance." Erasmus chided Luther in the "Hyperaspistes," AS, IV, 382, with the accusation that Luther wanted to be the lord of the Scriptures, not their dispenser.

⁵⁵ "The Godly Feast," (1522), *Colloquies*, p. 53.

⁵⁶ "Hyperaspistes" (1526), AS, IV, 270. See also Luther's letter to Erasmus, EE, VI, 306 to 307, ep. 1688.

⁵⁷ AS, IV, 26 Ib; *Erasmus-Luther: Discourse on Free Will*, trans. Ernst F. Winter (New York: Frederick Ungar Publ. Co., 1961), p. 15.

For Erasmus' reliance on the mercy of God, which was not quite the same as Luther's *sola gratia*, see "Concerning the Immense Mercy of God," *Essential Erasmus*, pp. 226-70; Thomas N. Tentler, "Forgiveness and Consolation in the Religious Thought of Erasmus," *Studies in the Renaissance*, XII (1965), 110-33.

⁵⁸ "The Young Man and the Harlot" (1523), *Colloquies*, p. 157.

⁵⁹ "The Epicurean" (1533), *Colloquies*, p. 545.

⁶⁰ "The Godly Feast" (1522), *Colloquies*, p. 65.

⁶¹ "Ratio," AS, III, 200.

the Scriptures."⁶² Scripture cannot contradict itself.⁶³ The Holy Spirit is the Author of the Sacred Books, and it is not possible for Him to oppose Himself,⁶⁴ these books are "the treasury of eternal and most certain truth."⁶⁵ Holy Writ is for Erasmus a portrait of Christ.⁶⁶ This can be seen also that in his recounting of the details of the life of Christ, he did so as an aid for better exegesis and postulated that all details were to be evaluated as *doctrina pietatis*.⁶⁷

II

To understand the Scriptures one must embrace the *philosophia Christi*. However, a key to the treasure store of the Scriptures is a knowledge of the languages.⁶⁸ Erasmus shared with Luther a high estimation of the worth of Latin, Greek, and Hebrew. There is no question, Erasmus stated, that a thorough knowledge of the languages is needed for an understanding of the Sacred Writings. They can be learned with comparative ease, according to him, at least to the point of neatness and elegance. One cannot be satisfied with knowing only the Vulgate (Jerome made some mistakes), or, for the Old Testament, even with knowing the Septuagint and not the Hebrew. Erasmus cited the examples of Cato, Ru-

dolph Agricola, and himself to encourage his readers to take up the study of the languages, especially Greek, even though one is no longer of the same age as school boys.⁶⁹

Erasmus helped to further the study of the three languages by encouraging Jerome Busleiden to leave a bequest for the establishment of an institute in Louvain (1517). Busleiden left an endowment large enough to support a rector, three professors, and eight students.⁷⁰ Its history cannot be followed here (later it was absorbed in the university). Erasmus praised Busleiden highly in one of his colloquies.⁷¹ In another he allowed that Greek and Latin books were fit for young misses and married women.⁷² Magdalia, a character in that colloquy, praised the knowledge of the languages possessed by various women:

In Spain and Italy there are not a few women of the highest rank who can rival any man. In England there are the More girls [the daughters of Sir Thomas More], in Germany, the Pirckheimer [the five daughters of Willibald Pirckheimer of Nuremberg] and Blaurer [of Constance] girls.⁷³

Erudition and learning can be of service to the student of the Scriptures. Erasmus was conscious of class distinctions in soci-

⁶² "A Fish Diet" (1524), *Colloquies*, p. 339.

⁶³ "De libero arbitrio" (1524), AS, IV, 36 Ib 10.

⁶⁴ Ibid., AS, IV, 156 IV 1, "non potest pugnare secum."

⁶⁵ "Hyperaspistes" (1526), AS, IV, 494.

⁶⁶ "Enchiridion" (1503), AW, p. 75, lines 17-24; p. 94, lines 34-95; p. 148, lines 9-12; Kohls, I, 98-99; *ibid.*, II, 98, n. 180 and n. 182.

⁶⁷ Kohls, II, 112, n. 413; see also Kohls, I, 80-81, 182-83.

⁶⁸ "Methodus," AS, III, 42; EE, I, 334-41, ep. 143, to Anthony of Bergen.

⁶⁹ "Ratio," AS, III, 130-43; "Methodus," AS, III, 42-51.

⁷⁰ *Erasmi Opuscula: A Supplement to the Opera Omnia*, ed. Wallace K. Ferguson (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1933), pp. 194-96; Thompson in *Colloquies*, pp. 224-25, and references cited there.

⁷¹ "The Epithalamium of Peter Giles" (1524), *Colloquies*, pp. 225-29, especially p. 227.

⁷² "The Abbot and the Learned Lady" (1524), *Colloquies*, p. 219.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 223.

ety and knew that not all could know the ancient languages⁷⁴ and that their knowledge was not essential to the *philosophia Christi*. Without them the pious Christian possessed the "true gifts of Christ," which in the rollicking farce about Pope Julius II he described as "holiness of life, sacred learning, burning love, prophecy, virtues."⁷⁵ For all that, it must be emphasized that Erasmus contended frequently for the study of the ancient languages, Hebrew, Greek, and Latin. In paying tribute to the late Johannes Reuchlin (1455 to 1522) he called him "that famous phoenix of learning, triple-tongued John Reuchlin."⁷⁶ In a vision he saw Reuchlin and Jerome dressed in robes of transparent crystal decorated with tongues of bronze, emerald, and sapphire, signifying "the three languages in which they excelled."⁷⁷ Erasmus composed a collect for Reuchlin:

O God, thou lover of mankind, who through thy chosen servant John Reuchlin hast renewed to the world the gift of tongues, by which thou didst once from heaven, through the Holy Spirit, instruct the apostles for the preaching of the gospel, grant that all men everywhere may preach in every tongue the glory of thy son Jesus. Confound the tongues of false apostles who band themselves to build the impious tower of Babel, attempting to obscure thy glory whilst minded to exalt

⁷⁴ Kohls, I, 166—67.

⁷⁵ *The Julius Exclusus of Erasmus*, trans. Paul Pascal, ed. J. Kelley Sowards (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968), p. 88, lines 1175-76; *Opuscula*, p. 122.

⁷⁶ "The Apotheosis of That Incomparable Worthy, JOHN REUCHLIN" (1522), *Colloquies*, p. 81. See pages 79—86 for the entire colloquy. My article on "Erasmus and Reuchlin" will appear in *Moreana*, 23 (December 1969).

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

their own; since to thee alone, with Jesus thy son our Lord, and the Holy Spirit, belongs all glory, for ever and ever. Amen.⁷⁸

Elsewhere Erasmus recounted in some detail how Jerome (ca. 350—420) studied Hebrew after he settled down in Bethlehem at the age of about 35.⁷⁹ In the *Praise of Folly* Jerome is identified as one "who knew five languages."⁸⁰ Erasmus defended his strictures of theologians who do not know the languages in his "Letter to Martin Dorp" (1515),⁸¹ and after the publication of the Greek New Testament he issued a defense of the study of languages.⁸²

Erasmus did not minimize the value of the seven liberal arts, especially dialectics and rhetoric.⁸³ The would-be theologian needs that training, but the formalities and the eccencies of the schoolmen have no profit for him.⁸⁴ He should remember the foremost tasks of the theologian, which according to Erasmus were "to expound wisely the Divine Writings, to give an account of the faith, not of frivolous questions, to discourse about piety with propriety and effectively to bring forth tears, and to inflame souls for heavenly things."⁸⁵

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

⁷⁹ "Hieronymi Stridonensis vita" (1516), *Opuscula*, pp. 152—53, lines 527-53.

⁸⁰ *Essential Erasmus*, p. 165.

⁸¹ EE, II, 94—95, ep. 337; *Selected Writings*, pp. 68—69.

⁸² "Chonradi Nastadiensis Germani Dialogvs Bilingvum ac Trilingvum," *Opuscula*, pp. 206—24. I have followed Ferguson in stating that this work is essentially by Erasmus, pp. 198—203.

⁸³ "Ratio," AS, III, 142—61, 50—53, 282. The tension in Erasmus' life between "Cicero" and "Christ" cannot be examined here.

⁸⁴ "Paraclesis," AS, III, 26; "Methodus," AS, III, 55; "Ratio," AS, III, 163, 468—93.

⁸⁵ "Ratio," AS, III, 170.

Erasmus did not disdain translations of the Sacred Scriptures. He wanted all to read the Scriptures as lay theologians.⁸⁶ His words have often been paraphrased or repeated (sometimes without credit to him):

Indeed, I disagree very much with those who are unwilling that Holy Scripture, translated into the vulgar tongue, be read by the uneducated, as if Christ taught such intricate doctrines that they could scarcely be understood by very few theologians, or as if the strength of the Christian religion consisted in men's ignorance of it. . . . I would that even the lowliest women read the Gospels and the Pauline Epistles. And I would that they were translated into all languages so that they could be read and understood not only by Scots and Irish but also by Turks and Saracens. . . . Would that, as a result, the farmer sing some portion of them at the plow, the weaver hum some parts of them to the movement of his shuttle, the traveler lighten the weariness of the journey with stories of this kind! Let all the conversations of every Christian be drawn from this source.⁸⁷

To make the Scriptures a part of one's self one should memorize the sacred books verbatim, Erasmus counseled, echoing Augustine.⁸⁸ "However, in the first instance make yourself familiar with Paul. Keep him in your possession always; day and night he should be at hand and at last memorize the words."⁸⁹ Erasmus advised that this memorizing begin with the New

Testament, presumably, for the theologian, in the original Greek.⁹⁰

Erasmus had a higher regard for the New Testament than for the Old, as he had a higher regard for Greek than for Hebrew. The books of the Old Testament were filled with typology and prophecies, outlines and shadows of the Christ, according to Erasmus, citing Tertullian for his authority.⁹¹ Because of the New Testament "we are Christians" and in it Christ is taught more clearly than in the Old. After the books of the New Testament Erasmus placed those books of the Old Testament which agreed with the New Testament to a greater degree than the others, as for instance Isaiah.⁹² Isaiah ranked above Judith or Esther.⁹³ Erasmus quoted the New Testament much more extensively than the Old. In his *Adages*, for instance, there are 73 Biblical references, of which only 14 are from the Old Testament.⁹⁴

As for commentaries, they can be useful, especially if the best are used. Here, according to Erasmus, Origen cannot be compared with anyone else. He is better than Basil, Chrysostom, Jerome, Augustine, and others. All are human, to be used with critical acumen and respect. Life is so short and there are so many books that one must begin with the best.⁹⁵ Elsewhere Erasmus favored Jerome as the best along with

⁸⁶ Kohls, I, 166—67.

⁸⁷ "The Paraclesis," *Selected Writings*, pp. 96—97; AS, III, 14.

⁸⁸ "Ratio," AS, III, 458.

⁸⁹ "Enchiridion," AS, I, 372; *Essential Erasmus*, p. 93.

⁹⁰ "Ratio," AS, III, 458.

⁹¹ "Ratio," AS, III, 216; see also Kohls, I, 186.

⁹² "Ratio," AS, III, 468.

⁹³ "Ratio," AS, III, 222.

⁹⁴ Margaret Mann Phillips, *The 'Adages' of Erasmus: A Study with Translations* (Cambridge: At the University Press, 1964), p. 29.

⁹⁵ "Ratio," AS, III, 464, 466.

Origen.⁹⁶ However, the student of the Scriptures should go to the commentaries only after he has studied the books of the Old Testament, the gospels, and the epistles at first hand and groups his findings under *loci*, topics, for example, faith, fasting, the study of the Scriptures.⁹⁷ Erasmus was ready to grant the use of tools, but it was more important for the study of Scriptures to go to the Scriptures themselves, *ad fontes*, in their original languages (for the theologians) and in translations (for the lay theologians).⁹⁸

III

Erasmus was mindful of the fact that there are difficult passages, obscurities, seeming contradictions, and almost unrecconcilable statements in Sacred Writ. His doubts and misgivings were many. Yet he would not brook Luther's charge that he was a skeptic.⁹⁹ Nevertheless he wrote:

For however much the authority of the Sacred Writings satisfies us everywhere even with one word, nevertheless it happens sometimes or other, that one can be undecided about an interpretation, particularly since the ancients also not infrequently differ. Accordingly, if many agree, they make for faith; if however they disagree or even oppose each other, they excite us to more thorough research (*scrutinium*).¹⁰⁰

Such an investigation will help the stu-

⁹⁶ See Kohls, II, 81, n. 202, for references.

⁹⁷ "Ratio," AS, III, 452. A convenient treatment of the *loci* method is in Kohls, I, 22, 223; *ibid.*, II, 37—39, notes 46, 47, 50, 51, 52; *ibid.*, II, 66, n. 93.

⁹⁸ "Ratio," AS, III, 418; see Kohls, I, 28 to 29; *ibid.*, II, 35, n. 39; LB, X, 1260B.

⁹⁹ "Hyperaspistes," AS, IV, 250, 252, 270; LB, X, 1258D, 1262A.

¹⁰⁰ "Ratio," AS, III, 454.

dent of the Scriptures to recognize idioms and figures of speech more readily and his constant meditation on the Scriptures, day and night, will make these peculiarities of the language second nature to him.¹⁰¹

An obscure page, he advised, is to be clarified in the light of other passages; mystical passages explain other mystical passages, and one holy word is explained by another holy word.¹⁰² Difficulties can be resolved by comparing the more concealed (*tectius*) with the clearer (*dilucidius*).¹⁰³ At first glance, at least, Erasmus pointed out, there are contradictions in the Scriptures. "Yes indeed even in many narratives an evident variation in outward appearance allows for the perversions of the wicked."¹⁰⁴ However, obscurities will remain in the Scriptures, he maintained against Luther, whether one ascribes them to the words or to the subject matter.¹⁰⁵ There are inner and most sacred portions of Scripture into which God does not want us to penetrate.¹⁰⁶

In his *Diatribes* or *Sermon Concerning Free Will* Erasmus said, "Many difficulties occur in Holy Writ."¹⁰⁷ He began this work on that note and in his final conclusion repeated that Holy Scripture is

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.* In this connection Erasmus quoted from the *Ars poetica* by Horace, not Deut. 6.

¹⁰² *Ibid.* In "De libero arbitrio," AS, IV, 20, Ia 11, he wrote: "Habet scriptura sacra linguam suam semet ad nostrum sensum attemperans." See also "Hyperaspistes," AS, IV, 387.

¹⁰³ "Ratio," AS, III, 170.

¹⁰⁴ "Ratio," AS, III, 232.

¹⁰⁵ "De libero arbitrio," AS, IV, 192, IV, 17; "Hyperaspistes," IV, 1276; LB, X, 1263B-C.

¹⁰⁶ "De libero arbitrio," AS, IV, 10, Ia 7.

¹⁰⁷ "De libero arbitrio," AS, IV, 2 Ia 1, "Inter-difficultates, quae non paucae occurrunt in divinis literis, . . ."

either obscure and figurative or seems, at first sight, to contradict itself.¹⁰⁸

The difficulties in the Scriptures will, of course, give the earnest student anxieties, but when such anxieties (*scrupi*) arise, one ought not to take offense or doubt the trustworthiness of the Scriptures (*de fide scripti*). One will weigh all the circumstances and look for a way to explicate the difficulties. The nature of the languages themselves cause a goodly part of the difficulties; figures of speech, parables, allegories obscure the Scriptures sometimes to the point of presenting riddles (*ad aegnigmati obscuritatem*).¹⁰⁹ Sometimes Christ spoke in the riddles of allegories, said Erasmus, so that later His own might the better grasp what He intended to teach them.¹¹⁰ "If, however, Scripture has no obscurities, what does that word 'search' [John 5:39] actually mean?" God willed that there be some obscurity.¹¹¹ Besides that, the idiomatic usages of the language must be understood.¹¹²

Difficulties can be reconciled. Hyperbations and hyperboles must be reckoned with.¹¹³ Popular expressions¹¹⁴ and am-

phibologies (ambiguities)¹¹⁵ are found in the Scriptures. Heed must be paid to the emphasis given a word or words.¹¹⁶ The literal sense cannot be accepted at all times, because the Scriptures frequently are written in allegorical language.¹¹⁷ "Whoever, therefore, wishes to investigate the Scriptures in earnest, let him observe moderation therein. However, the most prudent thing in examining the allegories would be to follow the sources (*fontes*)."¹¹⁸

Some parts of the gospels are a simple and plain report, Erasmus held; in some instances the authorities varied. There he would have to travel in "narrow straits." Hence, said Erasmus, "I let pass and say nothing." He cited some instances which in his opinion illustrated that

Jesus doeth so intermingle and temper His talk, that me seemeth His will and pleasure was, to be dark and not understood, not only to the apostles, but also unto us. There be also certain places (as I think) almost impossible to be expounded, of which one sort is concerning that [the] sin against the Holy Ghost shall never be remitted, another concerning the day of judgment reserved to the knowledge of the Father only and unknown even to the very Son [Him]self.

In these places and such like, if one write commentaries, he may at his pleasure without danger report the sundry opinions of sundry expositors. He hath liberty frankly to confess and acknowledge that he doth not understand the meaning of the place.¹¹⁹

¹⁰⁸ "De libero arbitrio," AS, IV, 190, 192.

¹⁰⁹ "Ratio," AS, III, 356. In "The New Mother," *Colloquies*, p. 276, Eutrapelus says: "In this expression ['the angels are spirits'] Sacred Scripture speaks obscurely, in consideration of human simplicity." See also "De libero arbitrio," AS, 26 Ib 3; "Hyperaspistes," AS, IV, 284.

¹¹⁰ "Ratio," AS, III, 368.

¹¹¹ "Hyperaspistes," AS, IV, 488. See also p. 536.

¹¹² "Ratio," AS, III, 374. See "The Sermon, or Merdardus," *Colloquies*, pp. 462—78, for Erasmus on ταπεινωσις or *humilitatem* in Luke 1:48.

¹¹³ "Ratio," AS, III, 380.

¹¹⁴ "Ratio," AS, III, 388.

¹¹⁵ "Ratio," AS, III, 394.

¹¹⁶ "Ratio," AS, III, 298.

¹¹⁷ "Ratio," AS, III, 400, 410; "De libero arbitrio," AS, IV, 84, Iib 5, 106, IIIa 12.

¹¹⁸ "Ratio," AS, III, 418.

¹¹⁹ A modernization of the translation in STC 2854a, fol. i.

The obscurities in the Scriptures were cited by Erasmus also as the cause for the divisions among the Protestants. "Since all deal with the Scriptures," he wrote to Luther, "why is there among you no agreement, if the Scriptures have no obscurities?" Even the simplest questions lead to the most persistent contentions.¹²⁰

One key to the understanding of Scripture is postulated by Erasmus in his distinction between the *littera* and the *spiritus*. "Everything that is written [in Holy Scriptures] has both an external, or, as it were, corporal, meaning as well as a mysterious, or spiritual, significance."¹²¹ This distinction is for him analogous to the distinction between soul and body.¹²²

Erasmus gradually came to advocating that one must turn to the church for a solution of the difficulties in the Scriptures. In the *Enchiridion* (1503) he advised Christ's soldier to go to those commentators who do not stick too closely to the literal sense of Scripture if he wants a better understanding of Sacred Writ.¹²³ In a letter to Martin Dorp (1515) he emphasized the reading of the Scriptures themselves in the original languages (*ad fontes*); he did not fear that corruptions in the text would divert anyone from Christ.¹²⁴ When he wrote against Luther in 1524 he said that

¹²⁰ "Hyperaspistes," AS, IV, 280, 494, 524; see also "Antibarbarus," LB, X, 1726E, 1263D.

¹²¹ "Enchiridion," *Essential Erasmus*, p. 63.

¹²² Kohls, I, 117—18, 136—38. This is the one hermeneutical principle which Erasmus has, for, as Kohls contends, in spite of John W. Aldridge, *The Hermeneutics of Erasmus* (Richmond, Va.: John Knox Press, 1966), *passim*, Erasmus has no full-blown hermeneutics. See Kohls, I, 141; *ibid.*, II, 115, n. 486, 131, n. 798, 135—36, n. 29.

¹²³ *Essential Erasmus*, p. 37.

¹²⁴ *Selected Writings*, p. 88.

he was ready to bow to the judgment of many doctors of the church.¹²⁵ He has Luther say, "Believe that there are by no means obscurities in the Scriptures and nothing that needs a judge, or, even if all are blind, I am not blind."¹²⁶ He called upon him to accept the authority of the church.¹²⁷ And in 1533, in his plea *De sarcienda ecclesiae concordia*, he urged a clinging to what the Roman Catholic Church has handed down "from Holy Scripture," pleading the primacy of the church although not speaking here directly to the issue of difficulties in the Scriptures.¹²⁸

All the obscurities and difficulties in the Scriptures, Erasmus said, do not darken the way of salvation.¹²⁹ Moreover, the Scriptures still remain a refreshment of the mind or soul more than food is for the body.¹³⁰ He maintained that "the foundations of Sacred Scriptures" have been given "to refresh as well as cleanse our souls."¹³¹ The Scriptures point the way to true happiness.¹³² In adversity they point to Him

¹²⁵ "De libero arbitrio," AS, IV, 192.

¹²⁶ "Hyperaspistes," AS, IV, 586.

¹²⁷ "Hyperaspistes," AS, IV, 495. Here he speaks of the *tot Orthodoxis Ecclesiae senatus*. *Ibid.*, IV, 500, he refers to the *Ecclesiae primates*. One of his most direct statements is, *ibid.*, IV, 506: "Nec tamen statim hac in re [de libero arbitrio] auctoritas Ecclesiae interposuit suam sententiam, sed intentis aliquandiu oculis in Scripturae lucem, tandem perspecta manifesta veritate pronuntiavit."

¹²⁸ *Essential Erasmus*, p. 375.

¹²⁹ "Hyperaspistes," AS, III, 448.

¹³⁰ "The Epicurean" (1533), *Colloquies*, p. 548.

¹³¹ "The Godly Feast" (1522), *ibid.*, p. 46.

¹³² Ad Matt. 1, STC 2854a, fol. ii A.1^r. See also ad Mark 1, STC, 2854a, fol. ii Aa^v; ad Matt. 5, STC, 2854a, fol. xvii^v.

in whom men "have a good hope, trusting upon the help of God."¹³³ The Word of God is a word of healing, a true panacea.¹³⁴

Erasmus' high regard for the Scriptures, his insistence that they be studied at first hand, his readiness to admit difficulties and yet to find the Scriptures the way to salva-

tion and particularly the guide to conduct as the *philosophia Christi*, make Erasmus important for Bible students. Whatever his services were by giving the world the first published edition of the Greek New Testament (1516) and by his *Paraphrases*, his insistence that the Scriptures were given that men should study them was highly significant.

St. Louis, Mo.

¹³³ Ad Matt. 4, STC, 2854a, fol. xiii^v.

¹³⁴ "The Epicurean," *Colloquies*, p. 545.